

THREE CRITICAL ESSAYS ON MODERN ENGLISH POETRY

(By T. S. ELIOT, ALDOUS HUXLEY and F. S. FLINT)



THE CHAPBOOK A MONTHLY MISCELLANY

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THE CHAPBOOK

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IT grinds no particular axe. It seeks to entertain rather than to elevate. It is neither Philistine nor High-Browed. It represents no clique. Its objects are literary; its taste is catholic. Sincerity is its only standard.

THE CHAPBOOK does not attempt to compete with the average monthly review. A definite continuity is preserved from number to number. Each issue is, nevertheless, of separate interest, and has its own readers accordingly.

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THE POETRY BOOKSHOP, 35 DEVONSHIRE STREET, THEOBALDS ROAD, LONDON, W.C.1.

A Brief Treatise on the Criticism of Poetry

ANATOLE FRANCE, a man whose intelligence must be treated with respect, remarks somewhere that " Criticism is the last of all literary forms ; it will perhaps end by absorbing them all. It is admirably adapted to a very civilised society whose memories are rich and whose traditions are already age—old. It is peculiarly suited to a curious, learned, and polished race of men. In order that it may prosper it demands more cultivation than all other literary forms."

This statement appears to me both false and pernicious. The critical genius is inseparable from the creative. Not that the most " creative " genius is necessarily the best writer of criticism ; but in a more general way, if a people could no longer produce an artist, it could no longer produce a critic. For if we ceased to be able to create works of art, we should certainly cease to be able to appreciate them. And, for the present generation, I think it is true to say that the conditions which may be considered to be unfavourable to the writing of good poetry are unfavourable to the writing of good criticism. During the last few years an enormous mass of verse has been printed, and an enormous mass of appreciations of this verse has also been printed ; and verse and criticism are of the same quality. There are three or four poets whose verse is worth reading ; there do not appear to be more than that number of good critics.

In so far as the people who write about verse are actually the same people who write verse, the coincidence is not surprising. It is fitting that poets should write about poetry ; but when it is an indifferent poet writing about indifferent verse the criticism is likely to be equally indifferent. When, as poets, they have no poetic method, it is quite natural that as critics they should have no critical method. If the public which reads reviews possessed any critical faculty of its own this would not much matter. But

the public has not yet learned to attach the same doubt to a review as to a report from Russia ; partly, perhaps, because a poetic reputation does not appear of so much importance as a Ministerial one.

Let the public, however, ask itself why it has never heard of the poems of T. E. Hulme or of Isaac Rosenberg, and why it has heard of the poems of Lady Precocia Pondeouf and has seen a photograph of the nursery in which she wrote them. Let it trace out the writers who are not spoken of because it is to no one's interest to speak of them, and the writers who are spoken well of because it is to no one's interest to take the trouble to disparage them ; and let the public also notice, in every case, who was the publisher. It will see, in the end, that the disease of contemporary reviewing is only a form of the radical malady of journalism. Criticism is a very different thing.

There are several kinds of writing that pass under the name of criticism. There is, first, an etiolated creation. This is not worth much consideration, because it only appeals to minds so enfeebled or so lazy as to be afraid of approaching a genuine work of art face to face. Walter Pater is one example ; there are numerous examples in Paris. It does not count.

There is another kind of criticism which is perfectly legitimate. This, again, is not literary or art criticism, but a kind of philosophy. If you isolate from the work of Sainte-Beuve what is pure literary criticism, you will have left out of account what is really the most valuable part. You will have failed to appreciate the pattern of Sainte-Beuve's carpet, which is not literary at all. Sainte-Beuve was not primarily interested in art, but in the soul and the body of man, and the varieties of clothing that the soul and the body put on. And a historian, or a philosopher, may use poetry as his data. He will have to be, of course, a man of sensitive discrimination. His work may be of the greatest importance. It is certainly of much greater importance than the work of Anatole France or Pater ; it need not be of less importance than what I define as criticism of poetry. But it is a different thing. The man who is interested, narrowly interested, if you like, in

poetry as an art, ought never to write about bad or indifferent poetry. The historian or the philosopher may. For he may find in such work a valuable illustrative document. And the public ought to learn to distinguish the historian and the philosopher from the reviewer and also from the critic of poetry. As it is, all of these various types are called "critics."

The third type of "critic" is the critic of poetry proper. Sainte-Beuve is the historian. Coleridge, himself a compound of philosopher, metaphysician and artist, wrote both philosophical and poetic criticism. You will find both in *Biographia Litteraria*. In his lectures and notes you will find some of the best poetic criticism that has been written about the older dramatists. Dryden is a poetic critic of the first rank. Aristotle, curiously enough, is more purely a poetic critic than Coleridge. He had a clearer mind than Coleridge, and a remarkable faculty for dealing with every subject of investigation by itself.

Every form of genuine criticism is directed toward creation. The historical or the philosophical critic of poetry is criticising poetry in order to create a history or a philosophy; the poetic critic is criticising poetry in order to create poetry.

This last statement is not to be taken too literally. Rémy de Gourmont is an interesting poet, but he is, I think, more remarkable as a critic. But unless he had been a poet he could not have been a critic. The critic is interested in technique—technique in the widest sense. You cannot understand a book on mathematics unless you are actively, not merely passively, a mathematician, unless you can perform operations, not merely follow them. And you cannot understand the technique of poetry unless you are to some extent capable of performing this operation. Only the person who is working on words in that way can understand their values. The philosopher who works a mathematical or physical theory into his system is certainly "criticising" the theory; but to the mathematician or physicist, occupied in further extending his theory, this philosophy is not of much use. And to the poet only the criticism of poets is useful.

We are, consequently, not to conceive of the critic as an ideal

censor, a detached observer keeping disorderly poets in check. The criticism which a poet can find of use to himself is first the advice and conversation of older poets, and second, the writings of Dryden, Campion, and half a dozen other poets, and third, his own criticism of better poets than he. He can learn more from Jespersen's English Grammar than from Sainte-Beuve.

Let us declare at once that there is nothing peculiar either in endowment or training to designate the critic. The critic of poetry needs the same professional equipment as the poet : the same knowledge of poetry, the same enjoyment of it, the same ear and eye, the same philology, the same general education. If any poet asks himself what writings about poetry have been of any use to him, he finds that they are almost without exception the writings of poets—Campion, Dryden, Coleridge, Gourmont, even Boileau—and that almost the only exception is the man who wrote well on every subject : Aristotle.

I say again that there are a variety of points of view from which thoughtful and useful study of poetry can be made. Poetry is also a social document, and may be made use of by the historian, the moralist, the social philosopher or the psycho-analyst. Nor do I say that the critic should not be aware of these aspects. He is only required to know what he is doing. And as poetry is primarily an art, that is to say, a means of communicating those direct feelings peculiar to art, which range from amusement to ecstasy, the first impression it should make is to the feelings of art, and the first questions it should excite are questions of art. It is a social document afterwards. And since it is as a work of art that a poem should be first discussed, the critic of contemporary verse should be competent to discuss it as a work of art. Let us now consider what is the proper behaviour for a critic when he meets with a poem that he genuinely believes to be a work of art, and whether our critics can be trusted to behave themselves properly.

I have in mind a sentence encountered recently in a literary periodical of the very highest standing—a periodical with which there is nothing to compare in *any* other country. This sentence

was not in a leading article or in a review, but in a small book-notice, and a notice concerned with other poems by other writers as well. It ran, in what I believe is called diamond type, almost as follows :

“ Mr. Honeydew’s poem, *The Golden Hoopoe*, would give fame to any book or paper in which it appeared. It is a great poem. The song by Mr. Leadbeater is worthy of Mr. Leadbeater . . . ” etc.

Consider the sentence “ It is a great poem,” and all that it implies. Assume that the critic is one for whose opinion you have vast respect : then he has told you all that you need to know. You read the poem, you become acquainted with a new work of art, and the literary periodical has served the most important purpose that literary periodicals can serve. But this never happens. Probably no one who read the notice really believed, or even entertained the thought, that the poem was a great poem. No one rose panting from the breakfast table and rushed hatless to the stationer’s to procure a copy. The periodical itself did not come out with a leading article on the poem the next week. Perhaps the editor himself never noticed this little critic in his diamond type, and he too would not have believed. I could not believe either ; I have never read the poem. The critic was believed by no one, incredulous eyes outstared him, and yet he was a brave little critic. For he dared to say the only sensible thing about a great poem : “ It is a great poem.” He was a great critic. Or else he was a very irresponsible, completely untrustworthy, poisonous little critic.

He took the honest course, the critic, if he really believed the poem was a great poem. What else is there to say ? Who wants an analysis, an account of the man and his message, his vision of life, his place as a representative of something or other, his derivations, his relation to his colleagues Mr. Leadbeater and Mr. Spooner—*before he has read the poem* ? But, as a matter of fact, it cannot be done in that way. It must be hammered. And so the good critic will merely say “ this is a good poem ” in a hundred different ways. He will make a column of it. He will quote and quote. When he writes about someone else he will

say, "Here and there we find a slight suggestion of the bitter intensity of Mr. Honeydew," or "With the inevitable exception of Mr. Honeydew," or a million such phrases. He will persuade the amiable Mrs. Saffron Walden to write a little article about Honeydew. The people who read Mrs. Walden's article will not read the poems, but they will be prepared to be impressed when they read another reference to Honeydew next week. Honeydew gets to know a few writers, and they will from time to time mention him. And after a time some of the important critics—the critics on important papers—will come to accept Honeydew. Not that they will *praise* him. But they will say, "The bizarre work of Mr. Honeydew," "The acknowledged leader of the Febrilist school of younger writers, Mr. Honeydew." No one will have praised him except the Good Critic and Mrs. Walden and a few private people with no influence. But he is all the safer for that : he escapes malice. Honeydew must not make himself too conspicuous, or he will sink to a depth at which even the diamond criticism will seem to be fame. He merely wants such degree of notoriety and such number of editions that the few intelligent people in each generation will be likely to come across his work. And in 100 years there will, perhaps, be popular lectures on English literature "from Chaucer to Honeydew."

So great is the value of good criticism, which is discreet advertisement.

I do not assert, by any means, that the only function of criticism is to advertise good poetry. But it cannot too often be insisted that the purpose—not of writing poetry, but of publishing it—should be primarily to give pleasure ; and that the purpose for which we suppose reviewing was divinely intended was primarily to indicate such works as can give the best pleasure to the people who otherwise may fail to hear of their existence. This is the purpose, I say, not of criticism, but of reviewing ; for criticism and reviewing are not to be confused. Reviewing, if it is to be done at all, should be done by critics, but critics have other things to do as well. Now the point at which a piece of

writing ceases to be a review and becomes a critical article is difficult to determine. But if we isolate reviewing from criticism its only proper motive is to call attention to something good and new. And this is exactly the motive which least often animates the reviewer. That it should be so is not wholly the reviewer's fault. For reviewing is, unfortunately, a means of livelihood ; though it is known to be one of the most corrupting, degrading, and badly-paid means of livelihood that a writing man can ply. The reviewers are merely the lowest wage-slaves in the modern literary system. Many intelligent men find themselves in this condition ; it is part of the social organisation or disorganisation that writers who have honest work of their own to do find that this is the only work for which they can be paid. Consequently, it is hardly to be expected that the reviewer, unless he has become so depraved as to have no other function, should enjoy reviewing. From the point of view of any man of the slightest intellect or taste, there is not enough good verse to occupy a reviewer one week out of the year. There is not enough pernicious work worth attacking to occupy him another week. So that twenty-five twenty-sixths of the reviewer's time must be occupied with books that are perfectly colourless. And the dilemma is this : either a reviewer is a bad writer and bad critic, and he ought not to be allowed to intervene between books and the public ; or he is a good writer and good critic, and therefore ought not to be occupied in writing about inferior books.

The other apparent dilemma is this : that if books of poetry are not reviewed, you must find some other way of introducing them to the public. If some other way be possible, the opportunity for criticism will if anything be greater, for it is the reviewer who kills the critic. And the harm done by the review-system is not only to the critic, not only to the public, but to the critic, the public, and the poet at once. In advance of the book comes always something which is not merely a statement that there is a good book to be read, and which is not, on the other hand, to be taken as criticism, since to read *criticism* without having already read the book criticised is meaningless. A poet may legitimately

take pleasure in his work in three ways. He may have the solitary joy of expression, of having turned his material into a work of art. He may have the pleasure of being enjoyed by a few people whose taste he respects and who, he believes, have more or less understood the poem. And he may have the satisfaction, equally legitimate, of having given entertainment, and the pleasure of which they are capable, to a large number of people who have not understood him at all. As for the review, every one is tickled by a "good review." But it is unimportant. Yet, as few writers of verse have so great conviction of the value of their work as to be indifferent to the pleasure they give others, and as in any case it is a pleasure to give pleasure to others, and as a poet only knows of the pleasure he gives others by what is written about him in print, the review comes to appear important. And the extraordinary result is that the greater number of poetry books are written, I am sure, only in order to be reviewed. The "good review" replaces, in the writer's mind, the pleasure to be given to the public. The books are born, reviewed, and die. I do not know who reads them; I never see anyone or hear of anyone reading them. Some people glance at them. But the book never reaches the public in a *pure* state. We are so saturated in the review spirit that we are satisfied to read about books; in consequence, we are merely—well-informed. A few rebellious souls complain that we have too much criticism, and not enough "creation." But we have neither criticism nor creation.

If it were only possible first to abate this nuisance of reviewing, we might hope for some improvement in the condition of verse. If it were more difficult for young poets to spring into brief and meaningless notoriety, they might be more self-critical. There should be no reviewing of poetry in daily newspapers. In the periodicals which appear less frequently, no work should be discussed except from one of the several critical points of view approved: the historical, the philosophical, the expert-professional. From the last point of view, only the absolutely first-rate should be discussed at all. If the several legitimate types of criticism were recognised, and the public and the critic taught to

distinguish between them, we might have more good criticism of each kind, where now there are only two or three critics who are not utterly confused about their own intentions. Let us come to look back upon reviewing as a barbarous practice of a half-civilised age. Let private presses multiply, and the advertisements of the great publishing houses be reduced in size. Let small books of new poets be circulated first among a private audience of the two hundred people who are most likely to be interested in them. The book, the price, and the address of the publisher, could be mentioned in the literary periodical. There is a great deal for these periodicals to do besides reviewing. If "critical journalism" is an activity quite apart from creative activity, if critics are a race apart from artists who hold the artist's destiny in their hands, both criticism and art perish. Let the practitioners of any art or of several arts who have a sufficient community of interests and standards publish their conversation, their theories and their opinions in periodicals of their own. They should not be afraid of forming "cliques," if their cliques are professional and not personal. The friction will be stimulating. Certainly there is no more useful criticism and no more precious praise for a poet than that of another poet :

" Fu miglior fabbro del parlar materno . . .
e lascia dir gli stolti. . . "

If we are really utterly sundered in spirit from the Pall Mall clubs, the country houses, and the provincial study-circles, it is a pity that we should have to depend upon them for support. If they purchase our works as a result of reviews in the dignified Press, and I am not sure that they do, they ought to be aware of the difference between reviewing and criticism to be aware that a review is not a complete substitute for feeling and thinking on their part, and that good criticism is something which must itself be criticised by the reader.

How the man of letters is to be supported if he does not write reviews is an important social problem of which I have no solution to offer.

You will never get good criticism either from the professional reviewer or from the superior dilettante who practises nothing. There is room for æsthetics, for philosophy, for history, for social analysis, and for the *conversation* of men who are reflecting, from time to time, upon the art which they practise. All of these forms of mental exercise have points of immediate application to the present moment, and it is when in some pertinent relation to the present moment that they are peculiarly suitable for periodical writing. A critical periodical, or the critical part of a periodical, is one drawing-room as a substitute for a thousand drawing-rooms, but it at least pretends to differ in that the people who talk in it are supposed to be those most fitted to do the talking. But it is of more significance that a poet should be discussed passionately in one intelligent drawing-room than in a dozen mediocre reviews—and a better prognostic of his permanence.

T. S. ELIOT.

The Subject-Matter of Poetry

OUT of what subject-matter can poetry be made? The question has been asked and variously answered many times in the history of literature. At one time poetry is all nymphs and smiling champagnes, at another nothing but horrid rocks and chivalry. But the human mind is too curious and expansive to suffer long confinement, and at the greatest literary epochs poetry has claimed the whole of life as its subject. The Elizabethans made poetry equally well out of the sublime and the ridiculous, beauty and ugliness, idealism and cynicism—out of everything, in fact, that intimately touched their lives. All limitations of subject are artificial and temporary. “The remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist, or mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the poet’s art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings.”

Any subject, then, may be made the stuff of poetry, provided it be apprehended, not by the intelligence alone, but by our whole selves, as beings who enjoy and suffer as well as understand. This was Wordsworth’s conclusion, and the truth of it is well illustrated by the example he himself chooses as a possible subject of future poetry—science. If we examine the poetry that has taken science as its subject, we shall find that Wordsworth’s words are prophetic. There is only one poet that I know of, Jules Laforgue, who has succeeded in making real poetry out of science. The scientific and philosophic doctrines which he imbibed from books were not carefully packed away, as is the case with most of us, in some upper chamber of the brain. They entered into his being; his emotions were tinged by them; he was haunted by them in the midst of the transports of passion; they were as real and near to him as hatred or love. As a result, he is science’s only lyrist.

Many others⁷ have written on scientific themes, but they were simply doing what could be better done in prose—expounding and explaining. What Laforgue did can only be done in poetry.

But much very enjoyable poetry, it may be argued, has been made out of subjects which do not intimately touch the poet, subjects which he can regard impersonally and from a distance. This may be called the conjuring-trick method of making poetry. You plunge your arm into the empty hat and by sheer sleight of hand you materialise a rabbit of superb proportions and the purest breed. Most of Leconte de Lisle's poems are conjuring tricks; Hérédia produced upwards of a hundred rabbits, bowls of goldfish and paper flowers out of nowhere by the same process. Among our contemporaries, Mr. Earp is perhaps the most skilful conjurer; he has just materialised an exquisitely wrought "Gate of Bronze." Now, while I personally find great pleasure in reading this kind of poetry, I am wholly at a loss to know what relation it bears to the greatest poetry and what is its absolute value. All literature contains the conjuring-trick element, but the best obviously is something more. The great poet gives us of his whole being. The conjurer juggles with a conceit, an image, a word; and his skill is so great we watch his performance enraptured and dazzled by its brilliance. To those who are seriously concerned with the problems of the universe the production of poetical rabbits out of empty hats will seem an occupation as revoltingly frivolous as Nero's fiddling. But to most of us who, to be entirely honest, have never deeply felt nor strongly willed about anything in particular, the conjuring trick will always be a very agreeable form of literature.

To be tolerable, however, it must be original. Nobody wants to look at second-hand Keatsian rabbits or bowls of goldfish *à la* Milton. The talented writers who stand with rolled-up sleeves, holding up these objects for our admiration, are not really as entertaining as they think they are.

The mention of these two great names leads us to the consideration of that deplorable traditionalism of subject-matter that weighs so heavily upon so much of contemporary poetry.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of two of the most pregnant of all poetical subjects, nature and love. Only in poetry do we pretend seriously to believe that nature is a person of like passions with ourselves. In our sober senses we know that nature is a machine, and that our fate is wholly indifferent to it. And again, while in private life we are convinced disciples of Freud, we go on assuring ourselves in verse that sexual love partakes, somehow, of the divine. And then we are astonished at the appearance of Marinetti and "Dada." We have brought them on ourselves. If we had listened to what Wordsworth said a hundred and twenty years ago, there would have been no need for the fulminations of these new prophets. Poets write too often, not of what they really feel, but of what they think poets ought to feel, just as the actors of our stage do not simulate real anger, but the factitious anger of previous actors. It is a common spectacle to see young poets writing about subjects in which they take no real interest, just because these subjects are the correct things to write about. If only they would understand that we do not in the least want to know what they think about nature—because they piously think what Wordsworth thought! We should much prefer to know what they thought of aeroplanes, or what was their reaction to Mr. Trotter's philosophy of life.

Reacting against the hopeless unreality of the stock subjects of poetry, the "youngest" of contemporary poets seem to be trying to rid poetry of any sort of subject whatever. The old themes are all remorselessly scrapped.

Love goes first: a worn-out, nauseating topic that can be left for fools to sentimentalise over. Philosophy—that is too heavy; and besides, what is the use of making up theories about the universe when they are all certain to be untrue? Beauty goes too; like love, it is so sickly and sentimental. Psychology follows; it is too slow and boring and elaborate, and there is nothing new to say about it. And so everything goes, till there is nothing left but a few little jokes and a few sensations. This is surely a deplorable conclusion to what is in its beginnings a

very healthy tendency ; deplorable unless you desire, as some of the most implacably youthful Frenchmen avowedly do, to destroy literature completely. Let us by all means puncture the bladder of pretentiousness, mock at lachrymose sentimentality, at fustian, at earnestness untempered by humour, at sickly-sweet prettiness. But let us also remember that these things are the corruptions of good ; and because they are very bad, shall we therefore reject the good things from which they have decayed—beauty, grandeur, a serious philosophy of life, the great primary emotions ? Too clever and too sensitive, we are perpetually haunted by the fear of having our work called sentimental or chocolate-boxy. And so we are reduced to our clowns and our bright prismatic sensations. The process has not gone so far in England as it has in France, where M. Cocteau re-writes Shakespeare for performance by clowns from the Cirque Medrano and M. Tristan Tzara recites his onomatopœic poems to the accompaniment of an electric bell of eight-inch calibre (a performance which it was recently my pleasure and privilege to attend). But the same tendency, advanced to a less extreme stage, is also discernible here. It will be well to look at the methods by which the poets of this school produce their effects.

It is by a process of dissociation, intensely and consciously carried out, that the poets of sensation succeed in endowing their work with life and interest. It is a process precisely the opposite of the mystic's discipline. The mystic throws his conscious life out of gear, opens himself and waits, passively, for the influx of the vast tide of his unconsciousness. He passes through a period of lethargy, of intolerable ennui, only to be filled at last by an immensely much larger, more important life. Our poets, on the other hand, concentrate on the passing sensations and ideas of consciousness, to which they give what is really a false vitality and significance by dissociating them from their context in the universe. They fix attention upon these small phenomena till they become somehow horribly significant. Edgar Allan Poe has a story of a man who drove himself to frenzy by the fixed contemplation of an old man's bleared eye. Little by little it

assumed for him a frightful, a nightmarish significance. The fact is that anything in the world may be made to assume this significance if you isolate it from its context, dwell upon it as a thing-in-itself, a solitary, unique existence. By thinking about it hard enough you can make the sunshine dance and sing, you can cause the whole landscape to crepitate and twitch galvanically as it does in the poetry of Miss Sitwell. Brilliantly accomplished and exquisite as the poetry of this talented writer often is, one is always painfully conscious of its limitations. It is difficult to see how it can advance. Obviously, you cannot carry the process of dissociation beyond a certain point. Great poetry is surely created by the opposite method, by something analogous to the mystical discipline, by a passing outwards from the immediacies of consciousness towards the universal.

It could be wished that the poets who still deal in the grand traditional subjects were a little more capable of justifying their continued employment. Anyone who, labouring at the sweated trade of reviewing, has had to battle with the turgid inrush of contemporary verse will have agreed, in moments of desperation, with M. Tzara, that literature ought to be destroyed. In more optimistic mood he would be content with a Society for the Prevention of Premature Poetry having statutory powers to interdict all writers of verse from talking of love, God, nature, or, worst of all, dreams. Happily, however, the tide of poetry, which, for a decade past, has been mounting steadily, with, finally, such an increase in speed and volume that it threatened, during the last two years of the war, to swamp our literature completely, now shows signs of declining of its own accord. Our children's children will scarcely believe us when we tell them that there was a time when poets sat down by the score, by the hundred even, to enormous agapes in Piccadilly Circus ; a time when out of all one's friends and acquaintances there was not a single one who did not write and publish verses ; a time when, both as a lover of poetry and a weary reviewer of it, one groaned to see the forty volumes of verse that made their appearance week by week, with unfailing regularity, on the office table.

The chief need of poetry at the present time is a dose of astringent criticism of the kind once administered by the Scotch reviewers. It suffers from the indiscriminate and sentimental encouragement of all would-be poets. Passable verse, of the sort that rhymes and rattles well enough to satisfy an unsophisticated ear, is a great deal easier to write than passable prose. Those who are too lazy or too incompetent to write prose are now encouraged to lisp in numbers. A little judicious discouragement would free us from these pests, and would do the genuine poet very little harm.

ALDOUS HUXLEY.

Presentation: Notes *on the Art of Writing ; on the Artfulness of Some Writers ; and on the Artlessness of Others*

AXIOMS

1.

THERE is but one art of writing, and that is the art of poetry.

2.

The test of poetry is sincerity. The test of sincerity is style ; and the test of style is personality.

3.

Personality in art is the character given to a work of art by the refraction of life through an uncommon mind, the artist's.

Style in writing is the character given to it by the selection of word and phrase rendering as exactly as possible the idea, emotion and vision of the artist, and by the rejection of everything foreign and superfluous.

Sincerity in writing is the conjunction of personality and style.

4.

We look to poetry, therefore, whether it is in prose, verse or cadence, for sincerity, style and personality.

5.

All writing which conforms to the sentiments of a group is vicious in principle. It is bad art. It is not art at all.

A group can have no artistic personality ; and an idea expressing a common sentiment is an algebraical symbol.

6.

All writing which seeks to astonish by an invented singularity is vicious in principle. It is insincere ; it is artificial in style,

and it apes personality ; or, inversely, it apes personality, and is, therefore, artificial in style and insincere. It is bad art. It is not art at all.

7.

But *non cuique datum est habere nasum*. There are very few with personality enough to give body to art. There are many who are clever enough to rig out their shortcomings with fine-sounding words and phrases. Whence, all writing without personality is vicious in principle. It is bad art. It is not art at all.

8.

There is no test of personality which can be applied automatically, and the clever will go on writing and receiving the acclamations of the crowd. The praise of journalists—who have crowd-minds—will make the wise reflect. The art that once has pleased will please again in imitations.

9.

There is no difference of kind between prose and verse. Since they are both words in order, and both have rhythm, it is obvious that they are essentially the same. Verse, however, has measure as well as rhythm. It may also have rhyme. "Free verse" has no measure, and it cannot, therefore, properly be called "verse." "Cadence" would be a better word for it. Cadence differs in no way from prose. Its rhythm is more strongly felt, and it is printed in lines of varying length in order that this rhythm may be marked. But there is no justification for printing prose in this way, except to point to a definite rhythmic intention.

10.

Rhythm is the succession of strong and weak beats in speech. In measured verse, this succession is regulated according to a scheme, from which slight departures are allowed for the sake of variation. There may have been, in the past, some artistic necessity for the adoption of these metric schemes ; but there is none now. Every schoolboy can acquire the tricks ; and all

work in metre should be scrutinised with the utmost suspicion. The *tour de force* of the genuine artist using metre is to convince us of his sincerity. In cadence, or prose, the strong and weak beats of speech fall into a natural order, and the stronger the impulse of the writer, the more marked will the rhythm be. This may also be said in a less degree of metrical writing ; but in the latter the metre is always there to be juggled with as well.

11.

Metre is used by most modern " poets " because it provides them with a framework of rhythm on which to hang their words. It is both a support and—like rhyme—a source of suggestion. Without this framework, their words would have rhythm—all speech has rhythm, and so has the baaing of a sheep—but, in many cases, they would not have a rhythm marked enough to distinguish them from the algebra of common humdrum conversation. In other words, a certain amount of craftsmanship only is needed to fill up a metre ; but only a true artist can make a rhythm that will please our ears for its own sake.

12.

Rhyme diverts attention from many defects and deficiencies. If a lame man walked by you with bells in his cap, you might not see his limp. Rhyme is to poetry what ear-rings are to a beautiful woman, a silly ornament, that is, no ornament at all—a toy trinket added to poetry. It is a nuisance to the ear of a reader educated to appreciate the essential qualities of poetry.

13.

Metaphor is the fusion of two or more ideas into one image, simile the juxtaposition of two or more ideas. The ancients used metaphor sparingly and simile freely. Metaphor, however, appeals more strongly to the modern mind. It has been called the creation of new words, and the originality of a poet has been held to be comparable to his power of making metaphors. The language is strewn with dead metaphors, which we use habitually

without thinking of them as images ; and every new metaphor which takes root in the language lives its life as an image, and dies as a stereotype. (This passage is full of such dead metaphors.) There are, as a consequence, quite valid objections to metaphor, and a poet who purged his style of it completely and relied entirely on new simile to give life to his ideas, might create a strong, fresh and enduringly vivid style. A style into which dead metaphors have been allowed to pass freely gives a feeling of staleness. Old similes, however, are worse than dead metaphors, for a dead metaphor, unlike an old simile, is more or less unobtrusive.

14.

All stereotyped and conventional forms of speech and thought will be avoided by a poet.

EXAMPLES

With these principles in mind, let us examine the work of two writers who have acquired the reputation of being poets.

Mr J. C. SQUIRE

Mr. Squire has been called a great poet, and described as the "Sargent of modern poetry." His latest work is *The Moon* (320 lines). It appeared in the second number of the *London Mercury*. The first impression we get on reading these verses is one of conventionality of form. The form is a stanza of ten, decasyllabic, iambic lines, uniformly rhyming according to the scheme *ababccdaddd*, the *cc* rhymes being feminine. The second impression is one of conventionality of diction. The language has the movement, the sound and the tricks familiar to all readers of English poetry. The third impression is one of conventionality of treatment. All the stock poeticisms about the moon are here. Conventionality of form, diction and treatment : that is to say, absence of personality, style and artistic sincerity, accumulation of echoes combined with some quite ordinary observation : this is not art or poetry, but an exercise in verse-writing.

Let us, therefore, inspect the verse more closely. The first

impression is one of lack of distinction of the rhythm. It has hardly more than the beat of its iam . . . buses, and it bears much the same relation to a true poetic rhythm as a series of short pieces of matchstick placed end to end would bear to a true curve. The second impression is one of lack of fusion of the words. One word follows another, and is related backwards and forwards ; but beyond this grammatical relationship, there is none of that cohesion which distinguishes poetry, and by which, as has been said, the phrase or the strophe becomes a word. This lack of cohesion and lack of true poetic rhythm are, of course, one and the same thing. The third impression is one of a constantly obtruding awkwardness. Let us take this stanza :

“ For thee they watch by Asian peaks remote,
Where thy snows gleam above the pointing pines ;
Entranced on templed lakes is many a boat
For thee, where clear thy dropt reflection shines ;
On the great seas where none but thou is tender
Rising and setting, unto thee surrender
All lonely hearts in lonely wandering ships ;
And, where their warm far-scattered islands float,
Through forests many a flower-crowned maiden slips
To gaze on thee, with parted burning lips.”

Consider the phrases : *Asian peaks remote, dropt reflection, none but thou is tender*. The first contains an inversion of a kind which the author often uses to fit his metre or his rhyme. All inversions which are not the natural inversions of emotional stress are clumsy and inexcusable in modern poetry. The second is a contradiction in terms. Mr. Squire appears rather to pride himself upon his scientific allusions, and there is a biological reference in *The Moon* (320 lines) ; he might have applied his science here, for the light of the moon cannot in any sense be said to be dropt, still less its reflection by water. The third phrase is pedantically grammatical in one part and ungrammatical in another, and it jars. If the copulative must be “ is,” then consistency demands “ but thee ”—and the phrase still jars. If,

taking example by Shakespeare (and others), you insist on “none but thou,” then the ear demands the second person singular “art,” and the mind justifies it by considering “none but” as an adjective equivalent to “only” (and this is what Shakespeare—and any other writer not afraid of the grammarians—would have written, if they had not simply said, “thou alone art tender”).

Now, consider this stanza a little more closely. Look at those four subordinate sentences introduced by “where.” Is it not clear, either that the author has approximated only to his intention or that he had no very definite thought in his mind at all? What meaning has the second line added to the first, and of the first, is it not ridiculous to talk of a man standing *by the side of* a mountain? The second “where” sentence adds no definition to the principal sentence. What is really meant here is: “*When* the moon shines, the boats on lakes seem entranced.” The third “where” sentence may pass; but the diction of lines five, six and seven is deplorable, and there is no need at all for the words “rising and setting,” except that they fill two and a half feet. The last “where” sentence is another entanglement. What is meant is: “Maidens slip through the forests *of* far, scattered (not ‘far-scattered’) islands to gaze”; but the rhyme, ladies and gentlemen, the inexorable rhyme. . . .

Lack of artistic cohesion, lack of poetic rhythm, clumsiness: they can be found in all Mr. Squire’s work. Turn to the piece called *Acacia Tree*, an attempt at “free verse,” in *The Lily of Malud* (an atrocious title). It gives its author away completely. He is not a poet; and his verse?—“a thin-blown shape of a rhyme.”

“H. D.”

“H. D.” has published one book, in cadence, called *Sea Garden*, and a volume of translations of choruses from the plays of Euripides, also in cadence. The choruses have been highly praised, more so than the original work; but the same quality of presentation is to be found in both: sincerity; and it is this

sincerity—though no one seems to have made the discovery—which is the compelling power of both the translations and the writing in *Sea Garden*. You have but to read a page of either to be convinced that you are confronted with a style which you have never met before. Let us take section two of the poem called *Sea Gods in Sea Garden* :

“ But we bring violets,
Great masses—single, sweet
Wood-violets, stream-violets,
Violets from a wet marsh.

“ Violets in clumps from hills,
Tufts with earth at the roots,
Violets tugged from rocks,
Blue violets, moss, cliff, river-violets.

“ Yellow violets’ gold,
Burnt with a rare tint—
Violets like red ash
Among tufts of grass.

“ We bring deep-purple
Bird-foot violets.

“ We bring the hyacinth-violet,
Sweet, bare, chill to the touch—
And violets whiter than the in-rush
Of your own white surf.”

You cannot speak in regard to this book of conventionality or unconventionality of form ; for the form is a natural one, moulded only to the original bent and curve of the writer’s mind. You cannot speak of conventionality of diction ; for word and phrase are chosen with so much care for exactness of rendering that the impression made is sharp and fresh and clear ; and in the passage quoted there is no fear of repeated words, the repetition of the word “ violet,” indeed, helping towards the effect sought. You

cannot speak of conventionality of treatment ; for each strophe has in it the surprise of new vision. Nothing can be more certain, therefore, than that here is an original style—a style, in short ; and you cannot have style without sincerity and personality, each being a quality of the other two. And, when you find sincerity, style and personality in writing, you have found poetry. “H. D.” is a poet. You have none of those restrictions to make about her style which were forced from us when we examined the work of Mr. J. C. Squire. Her rhythm is distinctive. Her words belong intimately to one another—cohere. And, as for clumsiness, solecism and sloppiness of thought and speech, no trace. It is a style perfectly adapted to the poetic purpose it interprets.

“H. D.” has a vision of the world which she shares with none. It is her own unique possession. Her poems are packed with images so presented that she gives you the illusion of having recreated the world from which she draws them (examine once more her offering of violets to the gods of the seas) ; and they are poised in an emotional reticence which seems to promise a greater revelation, if your eyes are keen enough and your heart is pure enough. There is passion behind her words ; but it is a passion which has wrought itself into the hardness of gems. She has a secret which you are only allowed to guess at, and she calls forth the same wonder and longing that are aroused by the beauty of the flowers and the seasons. She may be the most exquisite English poet we have.

F. S. FLINT.

[The original intention of this article was to examine the work of some ten different poets in the light of the fourteen Axioms with which the article opens. For various reasons it was found necessary to bring that number down to two. The work of these two particular authors is selected for examination solely as the most typical of the good or bad qualities to which attention is here drawn, that is to say, the most suitable, in the opinion of their compiler, for examination in the light of his Axioms.—EDITOR.]

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